

**REPRESENTING IDENTITY IN CINEMA:  
THE CASE OF SELECTED INDEPENDENT FILMS OF BANGLADESH**

By

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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

SFF – Short Film Forum

FFS – Federation of Film Societies

BFCB – Bangladesh Film Censor Board

BFDC – Bangladesh Film Development Corporation

BFA – Bangladesh Film Archive

Skt – Sankskrit

**PERLAMBAHAN IDENTITI DALAM SINEMA: KAJIAN FILEM-FILEM  
BEBAS TERPILIH DI BANGLADESH**

**ABSTRAK**

Dalam era kontemporari pasca-kolonial, globalisasi dan pasca-9/11, persoalan tentang identiti kebangsaan telah muncul sebagai salah satu isu yang penting. Kajian yang berbentuk eksploratif ini bertujuan untuk meninjau perlambangan identiti Muslim Bengali iaitu identiti kebangsaan Bangladesh, dalam filem-filem bebas terpilih oleh Sayeed Abu, Tanvir Mokammel, Morshedul Islam dan Tareque Mas'ud. Perspektif teori identiti nasional oleh Ernest Gellner, Benedict Anderson, Arjun Appadurai, Homi Bhabha K dan Stuart Hall serta pandangan tentang perlambangan oleh Stuart Hall digunakan dalam kajian ini. Perspektif teori naratologi dari wacana naratologi oleh Gerard Genette telah diaplikasikan untuk menyempurnakan analisis tekstual filem. Selain daripada itu, pandangan institusi budaya digunakan untuk membincang perhubungan sejarah budaya dan sosial dengan industri filem bebas. Kajian ini menampilkan pendekatan kualitatif yang merangkumi kaedah temubual mendalam dan kajian tekstual. Kajian ini mendapati bahawa filem-filem bebas Bangladesh cuba untuk menggambarkan ciri-ciri etnik Bengali sebagai pendekatan identiti yang lebih digemari daripada pendekatan identiti yang berlandaskan agama seperti ciri-ciri Muslim dan identiti pendekatan agama popular. Perbincangan dalam kajian ini juga mencadangkan bahawa untuk mempertahankan unsur-unsur budaya etnik Bengali dalam paparan filem-filem bebas, pengarah-pengarah filem bebas tidak ragu untuk menyesuaikan diri dan filem-filem mereka untuk kepentingan khalayak global. Kajian ini juga mendapati bahawa sinema bebas di Bangladesh amat berpengaruh sebagai satu institusi budaya dalam menggambarkan identiti kebangsaan. Penyelidikan ini memberikan sumbangan terhadap pemahaman dan perdebatan mengenai pendekatan identiti yang digunakan dalam masyarakat Bangladesh. Hal ini seterusnya membantu menyelesaikan perbincangan mengenai pendekatan identiti nasional individu dan menyumbang pengetahuan terhadap perkembangan identiti masyarakat, negara dan kebangsaan serta menghasilkan pengetahuan baru dalam sinema Asia dalam disiplin kajian sinema dan budaya global.

# **REPRESENTING IDENTITY IN CINEMA: THE CASE OF SELECTED INDEPENDENT FILMS OF BANGLADESH**

## **ABSTRACT**

In the contemporary post-colonial, globalised and post-9/11 era, the question of national identity has emerged as a significant one. This explorative study tends to examine how the Bengali Muslim identity i.e. the national identity of Bangladesh, is represented in selected independent films. The key objective of the study is to examine how national identity is represented in selected independent films made by four leading independent filmmakers – Abu Sayeed, Tanvir Mokammel, Morshedul Islam and Tareque Masud. Theoretical applications of national identity by Earnest Gellner, Benedict Anderson, Arjun Appadurai, Homi K Bhabha and Stuart Hall and the notion of representation by Stuart Hall are instructive here in guiding this study. For textual analysis of selected films, film narratology derived from the theory of Narrative Discourse by Gerard Genette has been applied. Also the idea of cultural institution is used to relate to the topic to the larger cultural, historical and societal aspects. The method of the study is qualitative and the measures of the study are in-depth interviews and analyses of film texts. The analyses find the independent filmmakers of Bangladesh try to depict Bengaliness, the ethno-linguistic identity approach, as the preferred identity approach of Bengali Muslims and portray Muslimness, the religious identity and popular religion identity approach, as the ‘other’ identity. The findings also suggest that to sustain the ethnic and cultural elements of Bengaliness on the screen, directors do not hesitate to orientalise themselves to the interests of the global audience. The study finds independent cinema of Bangladesh as an influential cultural institution in portraying national identity. This study contributes to the understanding of the identity debate and diversity prevailing in the society. This, in turn, it helps resolving discussion on contesting of identity approaches and contributes to the development of society, polity and nationhood as well as generate new knowledge in Asian cinema and national cinema within the global discipline of cinema studies.

## CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

Cinema is an important system of representation which plays a vital role in constructing national and cultural identity of a nation. Nation is an ‘imagined community’ (Anderson, 2001) which needs systematic representation of its imagined solidarity and uniformity to establish and perpetuate the idea of nationness.

This study tends to analyse how identity, basically the national identity of Bangladesh is represented in the independent films of Bangladesh. National identity has always been represented in literary and other art forms with importance. In the contemporary era of human history, especially in the time of globalization and post 9/11 period, national identity gets a complex shape and the complexity increases especially in the Muslim countries. As Frederick Jameson suggests that all third-world texts are necessarily ... *national allegories* (Jameson, 1986 cited in Ahmad, 1992), therefore independent films of Bangladesh as ‘third world texts’ also appear as nationalist narratives. This is literally true for independent films of Bangladesh where national identity has been portrayed time and again which leads to create a scope to study the nature of representation of the national identity in those films.

Independent film of Bangladesh portrays the national identity of Bangladesh on the screen with enthusiasm and the portrayal has certain characteristics. In the context of Bangladesh, while contemporary mainstream industry is busy with producing mere entertainment through easy sex and violence formula, independent film tradition on the other hand, portray the social and political realities of Bangladesh. The Liberation War of 1971 is a much addressed subject in independent films. Also few other films deal with other incidents of national history. Though a lot of films have been made on the national identity issues such as Liberation War, but this identity representation on the screen is under-researched. This study attempts to examine how identity is represented by independent filmmakers.

While analysing the representation of identity, four feature films made by four leading independent filmmakers have been selected. All these films were made in the new millennium (from 2000 to 2006). There are several reasons behind in selecting the films from this era. Generally the maturity and heritage of Bengali cinema in India are well recognised by the contribution of Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak, Mrinal Sen and other filmmakers. But independent film culture in Bangladesh reached its maturity and uniformity in the era of 2000 onwards in terms of its format, length and advanced technology used in the films. In contrast, earlier independent films of Bangladesh were either short in length or the format of film was indefinite. But in this era independent feature films were made in 35 mm format using the latest technologies which is full in length. However tragic incident of 9/11 in 2001 had staggered the world and it had stirred the identity issues predominantly in Muslim countries like Bangladesh. After the incident, the Western world looks to the Muslim countries with different views and Muslims look at themselves with different notions. Two subsequent aggressive wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and assault of Muslims in the Western society had created an upsurge of Muslimness throughout the world. Bangladesh is not exceptional. So, it would be interesting to see the nature of identity portrayal in the films made around 9/11 incident.

Though I have selected contemporary films for exploring the identity issues within those films, I have referred to a few earlier films to understand the issues addressed more comprehensively.

Every film predominantly deals with at least one of the three identity approaches of greater Bengali Muslim Identity – *Bengaliness*, *Muslimness* and *popular religion*. Bengaliness is an ethno-linguistic identity of the nation that emerged in the middle age in Bengal through Bengali literature and culture. It reached its peak in the 1960s in the autonomy movement against central West Pakistan government. This autonomy movement was followed by Bengali Language Movement in 1952 preceded by independence war of Bangladesh in 1971.



Muslimness is a religious identity which first emerged in 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengal by some Islamic reformist movements – such as *Faraizi Movement*. Later Muslimness as a religious identity was converted to the Pakistan movement in 1910-40s in the British India. Popular religious practices were once the mainstream identity in the ancient and the middle age of Bengal. After the arrival of Muslim jingoism in 19<sup>th</sup> century it went undercurrent in the Bengal society, which is now distinguished as popular sub-culture. Buddhist Tantricism, Islamic Sufism and Hindu Vaishnavism – all three liberal streams of three major religions in Indian sub-continent had resulted to several popular religious practices in Bengal that had accumulated together in the *Baul Cult*. Liberal humanist philosophy, some esoteric yogic practices, and syncretic religious beliefs can be identified as the basic principles and practices of the popular religions. The three identity approaches on Bengalinness, Muslimness and Popular Religion will be further discussed in Chapter 4.

For the sake of the analysis, I have employed the theory of representation formulated by Stuart Hall (Hall, 1997) and the theory of national identity discussed by scholars like Ernest Gellner (Gellner, 1983 cited in Smith, 1999), Benedict Anderson (Anderson, 2001), Arjun Appadurai (Appadurai, 2001), Homi K. Bhabha (Bhabha, 1990) and Stuart Hall (1999). In the theory of representation, Hall (Hall, 1997) describes three approaches of representation: the reflective, intentional and constructive. The first approach reflects the true meaning, as it already exists in the world. In the second approach which is the intentional approach, words (texts) mean what the author intends they should mean. And finally in the third approach which is constructive approach, things do not mean, meaning is constructed using representational systems – concepts and signs. This research focuses on the constructionist view of representation of independent film directors. In the theory of national identity, Ernest Gellner (Gellner, 1983 cited in Smith, 1999) suggests nation is ‘a contingent, artificial, ideological invention’ and Benedict Anderson (Anderson, 2001) finds nation as an ‘imagined community’. According to Gellner (Gellner, 1983 cited in Smith, 1999) nation was ‘invented’ through education system and Anderson suggests ‘imagining’ the nation was

possible by print media. Appadurai (Appadurai, 2001) discusses how nation homogenise its people to sustain the imagined community. Hall (Appadurai, 1999) says the nation itself is a 'system of representation' which is echoed by Bhabha (1990) as he states national identity as a 'production of image'. These ideas would help this study to consider nation as an artificial invention and an imagined community, and through the representational systems (education, print media, film) the idea of nationness is further enhanced and perpetuated.

The theory of cultural institution is considered important for this study to relate the representations of national identity with its larger cultural, historical and societal aspects. For textual analysis of films which is a part of the study, *film narratology* derived from the theory of *narrative discourse* formulated by French structuralist scholar Gerard Genette (1980) has been applied. In film narratology model there are three elements – *recit*, *histoire* and *narration*. Recit broadly means the message, histoire the storyline and narration the narrative techniques of the text. Also for the sake of textual analysis, theory of adaptation has been discussed, because two selected films have been adapted from two novels and one from a play (all theoretical notions are to be discussed further in Chapter 2).

Since there is no prior research available on the above-mentioned topic, this study is exploratory in nature. According to Earl Babbie (Babbie, 2007), this [exploratory] approach typically occurs when a researcher examines a new interest or when the subject of study itself is relatively new. This is a qualitative study and is supported with in-depth interview with some of the independent film animators. Textual analysis of selected films would be another method of obtaining data. Secondary sources have been used also for acquiring data and supportive materials to establish arguments.

### **1.1 Independent Film**

Ideally, an independent film is not produced and distributed through a major studio. According to film critic Roger Ebert independent film is "a film made outside the traditional

[Hollywood] studio system, often with unconventional financing, and it's made because it expresses the director's personal vision rather than someone's notion of box-office success" (Ebert, 1987 cited in Levy, 1999). Emanuel Levy sums up the 'traditional' idea of an independent film:

Ideally, an indie [independent film] is a fresh, low-budget movie which is a gritty style and off-beat subject matter that expresses the film-maker's personal vision. (Levy, 1999: 2)

From these two definitions, two basic characteristics of independent cinema can be found: one, the characteristic regarding the production is made and distributed without the intervention of any major film studio and two, the characteristic regarding the content is made with the filmmaker's personal vision and control. Independent filmmaking has become an opportunity to some filmmakers to break the rules of traditional narrative and to experiment new or different ways of delivering stories. Sometimes, it is closely related to underground films, alternative films, avant garde or experimental films. In short, it is a low-budget film with unconventional narrative and without a goal of profit making and primarily, not backed up by a major studio.

In United States, under the aggressive film culture offered by Hollywood, there is also a strong independent filmmaking tradition. According to the data provided by Michael Allen, in 1985, 50 independently produced films were released in America. In 1998 that figure was in excess of 1,000 (Allen, 2003). American independent films could be categorised as race and minority cinema, queer cinema, and feminist cinema. It has also strong documentary filmmaking traditions (Allen, 2003). Filmmakers like Jim Jarmush, John Sayles, Spike Lee, David Lynch, Steven Soderbergh, Alison Anderson and others are considered American independent filmmakers. But in the American context, it is not always easy to make difference between major and indie films. Sometimes the same filmmaker makes both the major and independent films. Emanuel Levy discusses the issue considering the films of Spike Lee as a case:

Strictly speaking, Spike Lee has made only two indies: *She's Gotta Have It* (1986), distributed by Island, and *Girl 6* (1996), released by Fox Searchlight. But where does *Get on the Bus* (1996) fit in? It was independently financed by black patrons, then picked up for distribution by a major studio, Columbia. To complicate matters further, some of Lee's studio movies – *Do the Right Thing* (Columbia) and *Clockers* (Universal) – are more independent in spirit than *Girl 6* (Levy, 1999: 4).

In the USA, independent films also have their distributors but they distribute only independent films. Miramax was a famous and leading independent distributor, but it was then sold to a major studio Disney in 1993. Thus, other than some core independent distributors like Lion Gate, almost every major company has its independent version, such as Sony Classics, Warner Independent, Paramount classics, Fox Searchlights etc.

However, the context of independent cinema is not the same in every country. But where there is a big studio, there is a tradition of independent filmmaking, which may not be similar with its name and characteristics. Third Cinema<sup>1</sup> of Latin America can be mentioned as an example of independent filmmaking. In a country like Australia or Canada, they do not have many local industry-films, but they are at the receiving end of the hegemonic Hollywood films. So whatever they make under government patronisation, in their context, is independent. In India, against the huge Bollywood industry, the government tries to keep alive the parallel film tradition, but they have some real independent film tradition especially in the southern part of the country. In Malaysia, thrive of independent filmmaking is seen in the new millennium. According to Gaik Cheng Khoo, the current KL-based independent filmmaking phenomenon in Malaysia began in 2000 with Amir Muhammad's film *Lips to Lips*, which is deemed as 'Malaysia's first digital feature' (Khoo, undated). Malaysian independent films are known for their diversity of styles, genres, issues and approaches. Recently, independent filmmaking is getting its revised form through digital filmmaking in most of the countries. This video technology with its computer-based editing system has

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<sup>1</sup> In 1969 Argentine filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino relabeled Third World Cinema – cinema movements emerging from Europe's newly independent former colonies in Africa, Asia, and Latin America – as Third Cinema. Third Cinema as a concept announced its position to the First Cinema (commercial and industrial Hollywood) and Second Cinema (the international, author-driven art cinema). Rather than designating a specific geographical or cultural location, Third Cinema championed a political stance that favored liberation and cultural decolonization (Pramaggiore and Wallis, 2006).

made potential filmmaking cheaper and has ensured filmmakers control over the film the areas of finance, distribution and exhibition.

Bangladesh has an ideal independent film tradition. Since mid 1980s, low budget short films had started to be made with their own distribution system by ignoring the dominant studio system. With the shift to its primary form and trends, the independent filmmaking is still continuing its production with prestige. The scope of digital filmmaking has inspired new filmmakers to give a newer shape of independent filmmaking in Bangladesh.

For an independent filmmaker, it is always a challenge to keep up with the independence of his film in terms of his control over it. As filmmaking is very much dependent on funds, there is always a chance of compromise in terms of its content and the form of the films. By compromising to the producers, a filmmaker loses control over his or her film. In the American context, Chuck Kleinhans says, independent film is a calling card that allows Hollywood executives to see what a new director can do with a low-budget project (Kleinhans, 1998). From the industry's point of view, contracting former independent directors gets the industry young talent that will work cheap, finish on time and on budget, and satisfy the producers' specification (Kleinhans, 1998). But some filmmakers do not go to the path of compromise and fight till the end to live their independence. The challenge and tension of keeping the independence is a part of the process of making independent film. In Bangladesh, in recent times, some directors compromise by taking the corporate fund channeled through the television channels and while some are fighting to keep their independence.

## **1.2 Bengali Cinema and Identity Issues**

Until 1956, Bengali cinema meant cinema made from Kolkata. Since 1930s, it was a big industry within India, and Bengali Muslims from East Bengal were the consumers of the films. However, the international recognition of Satyajit Ray and artistic success of some

other filmmakers like Ritwik Ghatak and Mrinal Sen from West Bengal, India created a profound impact on the filmmakers of Bangladesh. The Dhaka-based first full length sound feature film *Mukh O Mukhosh (The Face and the Mask)* was made in 1956, just after the next year of the release of *Pather Pachali* by Satyajit Ray. The film industry in Bangladesh, which is also known as Bangladesh Film Development Corporation (BFDC) was established in 1957. One of the earlier films *Ashia* (1960) was produced from BFDC and directed by Fateh Lohani was highly influenced by *Pather Pachali*. After independence, the first internationally recognized film from Bangladesh, *Suryo Dighal Bari (The Ominous House)*, 1979) directed by Masihuddin Shaker and Sheikh Niamat Ali was influenced by Satyajit Ray's neo-realist filmmaking style. The first film *Dhire Bahe Meghna (Quiet Flows the River Meghna)*, 1973) by Alamgir Kabir, who is an important *auteur* of post-independence Bangladesh, was a co-production with India. He had cast several actors from India in most of his films. Two of the three great filmmakers of West Bengal – Ghatak and Sen – were born in East Bengal and later migrated to India. Ray was born in India but his parents were from East Bengal.

So the plight of partition, or the reminiscence of their homeland were the subjects of films by Ray, Ghatak and Sen. Ritwik Ghatak is one who never accepted the artificially created partition of India as well as partition of Bengal and he had always talked about the cultural unison of the two Bengals. He made an important film *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam (A River Called Titas)* in Bangladesh in 1973. Thus, both the Bengals had influenced each other which reflected through cultural expressions like literature, theatre and film. It is not surprising that the independent filmmakers of Bangladesh are influenced by art cinema tradition of West Bengal. Zakir Hossain Raju says, in an informal setting such as within the film societies, they [the independent filmmakers] watched and discussed western films from Europe, the US and Indian art films before they embarked in making their own films. Therefore the [independent] short films in the 1980s-90s followed the textual forms of these foreign cinemas, especially of the Indian art cinema and Italian Neorealism (Raju, 2009).

Satyajit Ray portrayed the cultural identity of Bengal in his films but he had a universal outlook at the same time. Ritwik Ghatak concentrated in the issues of Bengal only – its politics and culture were his areas of concentration; he talked about the cultural unison of Bengalis and he incorporated melodrama and acting style in his films from local folk drama called *Jatra*.<sup>2</sup>

But the cinemas from West Bengal and Bangladesh are distinct as well. Since 1947, both of the Bengals were experiencing different political incidents. Bangladesh has gone through a language movement, and a bloody Liberation War. The two predominant religions in two Bengals have created different lifestyle, and different thinking patterns. In the earlier politics, culture and economy, Hindu Bengalis were predominant in all senses. Even the Ghatak's idea of cultural unity of Bengal was uncomfortable for using abundance of Hindu symbols and icons which is seen as a barrier to unity formation. According to Sugata Sinha, he [Ghatak] basically considered that Bengali identity had emerged from an archetypal layer of Hindu mythology present in the collective unconscious (Sinha, 2009). After 1947, Bengali Muslims from East Bengal had got the opportunity to create Dhaka as their own hub of culture and economy. Now Bengali Muslim filmmakers are more interested in portraying their own history and culture which hardly transcend the timeline of 1947. On the other hand, the Bengalis of West Bengal are eager to get their stake in national Indian context instead of looking back to the common Bengali language and culture. Observers say that, the future capital of Bengali literature and culture would be Dhaka. The distinctiveness between the two Bengals is getting clearer as time passes by.

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<sup>2</sup> Jatra is a form of folk drama of Bengal combining acting, songs, music, dance, characterized by stylised delivery and exaggerated gestures and orations. The Jatra may be traced back to at least the 16th century. Jatra played important role in colonial period to disseminate anti-British message. However, Jatra is the most popular entertainment medium in rural Bengal. It is performed in a rectangle stage – open on all four sides – with the orchestra combined of some local instruments like Dholok, Mandira, Kartal and Khol and some western instruments like clarinet and violin. The subject of Jatra may be religious, mythical, historical or social. (Khatun, 2003)

### 1.3 Cinema of Bangladesh and Identity Questions

Bangladesh is a cinephile country and it has a moderate industry producing nearly 100 films every year.<sup>3</sup> The industry was established in 1957, though there were a few early instances of filmmaking. The film business was substantial in 1960s and 1970s but declined in 1980s and 1990s. In the first decade of the new millennium, the industry declined the most but in the later phase of the decade the industry tried to revive to its earlier phase. However the gradual decline of the business was, interestingly, inversely proportionate with the number of productions.

Like other cultural institutions, the rise of Bengali Muslim identity served as the driving force for the establishment and development of Bengali Muslim cinema. The background of making the first full length sound feature film of the nation, *Mukh O Mukhosh* (*The Face and the Mask*), establishes the direct connection of cinema with Bengali Muslim identity. In 1953, a Bengali Muslim bureaucrat, Dr Abdus Sadeq, the director of the Statistics Department of the East Pakistan government, convened a meeting on cultural issues. In the meeting, Fazal Dossani, a non-Bengali Muslim film exhibitor-distributor claims that the humid weather of East Bengal is not suitable for filmmaking; also there is lack of film technicians and talents in East Bengal. Abdul Jabbar Khan, who was a play writer, director and actor, challenged Mr. Dossani proposing that filmmaking in East Bengal is possible and he would make the first film. Abdul Jabbar Khan, without any experience of filmmaking, was able to make a full length feature film in 1956 entitled *The Face and the Mask* based on his own play after facing a lot of hurdles and obstacles. So, the making of the first sound feature film was a nationalist answer to a non-Bengali mocker.

But this incident is not a solitary effort in the context of gradual identity formation process in Bangladesh under the central Pakistan government regime. There were progresses in other cultural institutions like newspaper, radio, theatre and fine art. Above all, the language

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<sup>3</sup> According to the website of Bangladesh Film Development Corporation (BFDC), in the year 2003-04 the total number of released films was 73 and in the 2004-05 the number increased to 84. [<http://www.fdc.gov.bd/fdc/filmlist.asp>, accessed on 27 January, 2009.]



movement during 1948-52<sup>4</sup> and its success had a deep influence on establishing cultural institutions like fine arts, literary publishing and film as well.

The success of *The Face and the Mask* inspires Bengali-Muslims to think over in establishing film studio in Dhaka. The minister of industry of East Pakistan Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (who later led the popular Bengali-nationalist movement and Liberation War during 1965-71 and became the Prime Minister of Bangladesh in 1972) introduced the necessary bill in the provincial legislative assembly in 1957. While entrepreneurs established film production studios in other major film centers in South Asia such as Bombay, Calcutta, Madras and Lahore during the 1910s-1940s, the establishment of Dhaka film industry was patronised by the provincial state which is again seen as a nationalistic step.

Not only *The Face and the Mask*, later films of 1960s and 1970s, continued to build up cultural identity with deeper influence on the audience of the territory. The text of the most popular film of this time *Rupban* (1965) by Salahuddin was taken from a *Jatra* play; and the most sensational film of the time *Jiban Theke Neya* (*Taken From the Life*, 1970), a political movie by Zahir Raihan plays an inspiring role in the anti-Pakistan protest movement just before the independence war in 1971. Thus, the cinema of Bangladesh was very much related to the formation of national identity from its beginning to its later development as a cultural institution.

In post-independence Bangladesh, when an independent film movement had started in the middle of 1980s, the filmmakers had made several films on identity issues; especially the Liberation War of 1971 was a very common subject for early independent films. Independent filmmakers frequently selected the Liberation War as a subject even until today. Thus since

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<sup>4</sup> Just after one year of formation of the state Pakistan, in 1948, the president Muhammad Ali Jinnah declared Urdu would be the only state language of Pakistan. His declaration was protested by Dhaka University students on the spot and a language movement had been started by demanding Bengali as a state language. The movement had reached its peak in 1952 and on 21<sup>st</sup> February, 1952 state police killed few students. This killing resulted more protests throughout East Pakistan and later Bengali got the status of state language. UNESCO has declared 21<sup>st</sup> February as International Mother Language Day in 1999.

the beginning of regular filmmaking in Bangladesh, the incident inside and outside of the film texts were closely related to the issues of identities. In the independent stream of filmmaking, identity of the nation has been represented with much enthusiasm which will be analysed in this study.

#### **1.4 Problem statement**

In the contemporary globalised and post-9/11 era, the question of national identity has emerged with intensity and complexity. In a third world Muslim country like Bangladesh, it is no less important where the question of national identity is represented in different literary and other forms of arts. As cinema can transcend the border of the nation, and incidentally national identity is regularly represented in the independent films of Bangladesh, in a sense they portray the nation in a global stage. As no in-depth research has been studied yet on the identity representation in the independent films of Bangladesh, this study contributes directly to the society, polity and nationhood in terms of understanding the identity representation on the screen. The subject of the study has its own importance because of its exploratory nature and the interplay of the interesting cinematic representations of identity on the screen. The four directors selected in this study are Tareque Masud, Tanvir Mokammel, Morshedul Islam and Abu Sayeed who are the leading filmmakers of Bangladesh and whose films are well discussed in the cine discourse of the country. In their cinematic representation national identity has been selected as subject in many cases. So exploring the nature of representation of national identity on the screen is one important and primary concern in the growing film studies in Bangladesh.

#### **1.5 Objective**

The key objective of the study is to examine how national identity is represented in the selected four films. The specific objectives of this study are:

- a. To examine the ways national identity is represented in the selected independent films of Bangladesh.

- b. To investigate the role of the independent cinema of Bangladesh as a cultural institution in relation to construction of national identity.
- c. To explore the way independent filmmakers of Bangladesh illustrate national identity of Bangladesh for global audience.

### **1.6 Research Questions**

The key question of the study is how national identity is represented in four independent films. The specific research questions of this study are:

- a. What are the representations of Bengali Muslim identity that are constructed in the selected independent films of Bangladesh?
- b. In what ways the cinematic techniques and the narrative structures of the independent films represent national identity?
- c. How does the independent cinema of Bangladesh work as a cultural institution in relation to construction of national identity?
- d. What is the position of independent filmmakers of Bangladesh in the stage of global cinema and how these films illustrate national identity of Bangladesh for global audience?

### **1.7 Significance of the study**

Since there is no in-depth study in this subject, this study tends to explore, it may be a meaningful contribution in realising identity representation in independent films. In this respect, this study will contribute to the progress of growing cinema studies as an academic discipline which will be an important documentation of Bangladeshi film tradition and culture. This study contributes to identity discourse of Bangladesh as well, especially by highlighting popular religion as a resolving formula against the two conflicting dominant approaches mainly Bengaliness and Muslimness. In that way, it may directly contribute to the development of society, polity and nationhood. This study has identified some limitations on independent filmmaking tradition upon which makers, producers and policymakers can

take some steps to develop the cine environment and culture. This research tends to contribute to the in Asian and World cinema studies as well, at least, in the areas of identity construction in cinema. This study also portrays the picture of film culture of Bangladesh and its impact in the society hence it represents a study on Bangladesh as a national cinema.

### **1.8 Chapter Outline**

Chapter 1 introduces the national identity of Bangladesh as a concern to be studied while it is being represented in independent films. The chapter discusses the issues and themes of the study which includes the discussion of the idea of independent film, the discussion of the connection of cinema with national identity in the context of Bangladesh.

Chapter 2 describes all conceptual and theoretical frameworks which include theory of representation, theory of identity, film narratology as the theory of textual analysis, theory of cultural institution and theory of adaptation. The chapter also reviews the existing literature related to the topic of the study.

Chapter 3 describes the research methodology of the study which includes measures of the study, the samples of in-depth interview and lists of selected films for textual analysis. It also justifies how the study is an exploratory one approached in a qualitative angle.

Chapter 4 discusses about the ethnic emergence and development of Bengali Muslim identity in historical context and the three approaches of the broader identity – i.e. Bengaliness, Muslimness and popular religion. This historical background makes clear about the essence of issues of Bengali Muslim identity which is needed in the analysis of representing the identity on the screen.

Chapter 5 discusses the beginning and emergence of independent cinema of Bangladesh as well as explores the current trends. Other than historical context this chapter also examines

some external but closely related matters of independent cinema i.e. the impact of film society movement on independent cinema, the role of the government towards independent cinema etc. This chapter also allows us to see the position of identity issues in the films in different phases of independent filmmaking.

Chapter 6 discusses different aspects of a particular film including storyline, message and film techniques by using the theory of *film narratology*. However this chapter identifies the representation of Bengali Muslim identity in the selected films.

Chapter 7 analyses what are the representations of Bengali Muslim identity in the selected films. Along with the representation of identity in the selected films, this chapter connects the findings with the theories of national identity and issues, trends, characteristic of independent cinema and Bengali Muslim identity discussed in chapter 2, 4 and 5 and thus establishes some interesting results of the study.

Chapter 8 is the concluding chapter which recapitulates the findings of the study, recommends for future research, and admits the limitation of the study and states other concluding remarks.

This chapter has introduced the essential elements of the study – themes and issues, research objectives and questions and significance of the study. At the beginning it has made clear the topic or subject, area and theme of the study. Also it has expanded the idea of independent cinema and discussed how the cinema of Bangladesh has been related with identity from the beginning and how and from when independent films have devoted themselves to the representation of identity. This chapter has also outlined the elements of the following chapters which can enable one to get the gist of the study.

## CHAPTER 2 – THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter discusses on the theoretical notions that are used to examine the representation of identity in independent films of Bangladesh. This theoretical discussion is needed to address all four research questions especially what are the representations that are constructed in independent films. The chapter discusses theoretical ideas like representation and national identity. This chapter also includes the theoretical discussion of cultural institution to examine the role of independent cinema in Bangladesh society in terms of representing identity. To unearth the message within the film texts, a method of textual analysis has been applied in the study. This chapter describes the model of *film narratology*, derived from the theory of *narrative discourse* by Gerard Genette (1980). It also includes the theory of adaptation for discussion because three of selected four films have been adapted from other literary sources. The chapter also reviews the existing literatures related to the topic, though all of them do not necessarily address the representation of identity in independent films but it provides us with some ideas about the prevailing situation in the independent cinema culture. This may in turn indirectly help to get the picture of representation of identity on the screen.

### 2.1 Nation and National Identity

*Identity* provides a link between individuals and the world in which they live (Woodward, 2000). Also identity shares some awareness and involvement of one with other members of the society with whom one is linked. This *identification* grows in ones mind with different dimensions of class, gender, ethnicity or place. For national identity, the members of the nation unite through a ‘moral conscience’ as Ernest Renan (1990) suggests, nation is an aggregate of men, healthy in mind and warm of heart, creates the kind of moral conscience which we call a nation (Renan, 1990: 20).

Identity is not fixed and unchanging, but the result of a series of conflicts and different identifications (Woodward, 2000: 17). If one considers *place* or geographical territory as the fundamental basis of *national identity*, a nation has to go through a long process of conflicts with other power or nation or she has to go through a process of evolution at least, and the identity of the nation changes time to time. The nation-state of Bangladesh with its Bengali Muslim identity was a part of India before 1947, later it became a part of Pakistan and finally it is now an independent state.

An influential account of the origin of the nation has been provided by the anthropologist and philosopher Ernest Gellner (Gellner, 1983 cited in Smith, 1999). In Gellner's view nations have only come into being with the advent of modernisation in general and industrialization in particular. According to Gellner, modernisation refers to a complex and interrelated set of social changes that transformed agrarian societies and their simple patterns to hierarchy and religious integration into complex industrial and secular societies.

Gellner's (Gellner, 1983 cited in Smith, 1999) account is a primary contribution in the theoretical discussion of nationalism. However, this nationalism, according to Gellner, is a contingent, artificial, and an ideological invention (Gellner, 1983 cited in Smith, 1999). Nationalism uses pre-existing, historically inherited proliferation of cultures or cultural wealth and most often transform them radically.

Gellner (Gellner, 1983 cited in Smith, 1999) suggests nation as 'a contingent, artificial, ideological invention', by echoing him political scientist and historian Benedict Anderson (Anderson, 2001) describes the idea of a nation as an *imagined community*. He defines:

[i]t is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or ever hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion ... (Anderson, 2001: 225).

According to Anderson, the idea of identity has its limitation and strength. It is imagined as *limited* because even the largest identity in the world will always see the existence of other identities and it is impossible to see only one identity in the world. Rather, almost every year, the United Nations admits new members. It is imagined *sovereign* because nation as a concept was born in an age in where Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely-ordained and hierarchical dynasty realm. Even religion or language fail to unite people, though imagined but nation can unite them in a deep and horizontal comradeship. To construct and perpetuate the existence of nation – the contingent, artificial, ideological invention and the imagined community – it needs systematic representation of its imagined solidarity and uniformity to establish and perpetuate the idea of nation-ness. Film is a form of media which acts as a vehicle of systematic representation of nation-ness.

Some scholars have re-examined the nations in the time of globalisation and post-modernisation where the discussion embraced complexity. Among them, Arjun Appadurai says the central problem of today's global interactions is the tension between cultural homogenisation and cultural heterogenisation (Appadurai, 2001: 256). In the time of globalisation the diversity of the nation is moving towards homogenisation. Appadurai (Appadurai, 2001) says the thrust of globalisation tends to homogenise, to be accurate, it aims to Americanize, all nations. In that process, there rose resistances against homogenisation by endorsing a promise in keeping a heterogeneous world.

But homogenisation, according to Appadurai (Appadurai, 2001), 'can be exploited by nation-states in relation to their own minorities' and thus 'one man's imagined community is another man's political prison'. Appadurai (Appadurai, 2001) identifies deterritorialisation as one of the central forces of the modern world because it brings laboring populations into the lower-class sectors and spaces of relatively wealthy societies.



Though Appadurai (Appaduari, 2001) applies the idea of homogenisation in the context of globalisation, this study has nothing to do with his idea of deterritorialisation, but his statement which relates to homogenisation – ‘one man’s imagined community is another man’s political prison’ – will be referred to in this study to examine how director’s inclination to particular approach of identity widens the gap between the followers of the conflicting identity streams.

The question of identity, according to Homi K. Bhabha, is never a self-fulfilling prophecy – it is always the production of an image of identity and the transformation of the subject in assuming that image (Bhabha, 1994: 64). This ‘production of image’ of the national identity has been transformed through education as Ernest Gellner (Gellner, 1983 cited in Smith, 1999) suggests or by books and newspapers and also as Benedict Anderson (Anderson, 2001) describes by calling the identity of a nation as ‘print community’. Stuart Hall (Hall, 1999) summarises the whole thing as a ‘system of representation’ as noted earlier. He says, [T]he nation-state was never simply a political entity. It was always also a symbolic formation – a ‘system of representation’ – which produces an ‘idea’ of the nation as an ‘imagined community’ (Hall, 1999: 38).

Bhabha (Bhabha, 1990) goes further by comparing nations with narratives which lose their origins in myths and the image of the nation seems romantic and metaphorical though it emerges as a powerful historical idea through political thoughts and literary language which can be suggested as a representational system. Bhabha says:

[n]ations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind’s eye. Such an image of the nation – or narration – might seem impossibly romantic and excessively metaphorical, but it is from those traditions of political thoughts and literary language that the nation emerges as a powerful historical idea in the west (Bhabha, 1990: 1).

The scholarly contribution by Gellner (Gellner, 1983 cited in Smith, 1999), Anderson (Anderson, 2001), Hall (Hall, 1999) and Bhabha (Bhabha, 1990) are the theoretical vehicles which will be used to analyse the representation of Bengali Muslim identity on the screen. In

this study, alike the nation here I apply the idea of ‘system of representation’ on film as well – because the concept of nation was formed and propagated by education as Gellner (Gellner, 1983 cited in Smith, 1999) mentioned and by print media as Anderson (Anderson, 2001) suggested. But as for Bhabha the idea of nation was developed by political thoughts and literary language which he suggested ‘again a representational system’.

## 2.2 Representation

According to Stuart Hall, representation means using language to say something meaningfully about, or to represent, the world meaningfully, to other people (Hall, 1997: 15). We live in the world of signs along with the world of reality, and we know the ‘real’ world through those signs – we live in a represented world. In our mode of communication, which ranges from our interpersonal interactions to the mass mediated world we signify things and apply meaning on those things.

Stuart Hall broadly speaks about three approaches to explain how representation of meaning through language works: the reflective, intentional and constructive (Hall, 1997). The *reflective* approach reflects the true meaning, as it already exists in the world, it functions like a mirror. Hall uses the example of Greeks who, in the fourth century BC, used the notion of *mimesis* to explain how language, even drawing and painting mirrored and imitated nature. Here language simply reflects or imitates the truth that is already there and fixed in the world called as ‘mimetic’. According to *intentional* approach words (texts) mean what the author intends they should mean. This approach is opposite of the reflective approach. It holds that it is the speaker, the author, who imposes his or her unique meaning in the world through language. And in *constructive* approach things do not mean, meaning is constructed by using representational systems – concepts and signs. The approach recognises the public and social character of language. Constructivists do not deny the existence of the material world. However, it is not the material world which conveys meaning: it is the language system or whatever system we are using to represent our concepts. Social constructionist

view of language and representation owes a great deal to the work and influence of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand De Saussure. For Saussure, according to Jonathan Culler, the production of meaning depends on language: 'Language as a system of signs' (Culler, 1976 cited in Hall, 1997). Sounds, images, written words, paintings, photograph etc. function as signs within language only when they serve to express or communicate ideas.

In cinema, directors use cinematic language to say something meaningful by using system of signs – it reflects, intends or constructs. Francesco Casetti (Casetti, 1999) says cinema does not provide us with an image of the society, but with what society considers an image, including a possible image itself. It does not reproduce society's reality, but the manner in which it deals with reality. Here comes the question of constructivist approach of a filmmaker who does not 'reproduce' (or simply 'reflect') the reality, the manner in which he 'deals' (constructs) with reality becomes important in studying cinema.

Hall considers nation as 'system of representation'. He says, [T]he nation-state was never simply a political entity. It was always also a symbolic formation – a 'system of representation' (Hall, 1999: 38). In the contemporary world, cinema has been playing a vital role in the symbolic formation of nation. Independent filmmakers of Bangladesh have been dealing the identity questions of the people of the country in a frequent basis. In analysing 'the manner in which they deals with reality (here identity)', this study follows the constructivist approach of representation by relating its construction with the greater societal and historical reality of Bangladesh.

### **2.2.1 Representing National Identity through Cinema**

A lot of nation states had emerged in Asia and Africa in the middle of 20<sup>th</sup> century just after the ending of the colonies. Moreover, almost every year the United Nations admits new members. Bangladesh as a nation was liberated quite later, in 1971, from Pakistan. So, newer representational medium has been included later with education, print media or literary

language ‘to produce images of nations’ (Homi K. Bhabha [Bhabha, 1990] calls national identity as ‘production of image’). In the contemporary world, cinema has been playing a vital role in the symbolic formation of a nation. Representing the nation has become an essential approach of cinema; the concept of national cinema in global film studies is the reflection of the approach. Above all, if ‘third-world texts ... necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegories’ (Jameson, 1986 cited in Ahmad, 1994) then cinematic representation of national identities are no different as a case.

The filmmakers of Bangladesh, especially independent filmmakers have engaged themselves in dealing with identity questions in the country. In their portrayal, they reproduce and sometimes redefine the prevailing identity discourses. This research examines the nature of those portrayals.

### **2.3 Cultural Institution**

This study considers independent cinema as a cultural institution to examine how this cultural institution impinges on the formation of Bengali Muslim identity. That is why it is necessary to define the concept of cultural institution, the importance of institutional analysis of cinema and how independent art cinema works as a cultural institution in the context of Bangladesh.

Tico Romao (Romao, 2001) identifies the art gallery or the museum as the examples of cultural institutions, which regulate the production and the conservation of cultural artifacts. One can consider film as the cultural institution as well, because it ‘regulates the production and conservation of cultural artifacts’. Friedmann and Morin named film as cinematographic institution (Friedman and Morin, 1952 cited in Casetti, 1999).

In the contemporary cinema studies, institutional analysis has been considered as an important way to study cinema as it includes the society. Tico Romao interprets it:

[I]nstitutional analysis avoids the singular connection paid to the film text itself that sacrifices the wider social picture for a narrow attention to the textual details of a film. On the other hand, the approach is not so encompassing that the analysis of films is swallowed up in the investigation of the broader social currents of the history. By examining the immediate social context in which films were made, institutional analysis seeks the precise historical link connecting society with the text (Romao, 2001: 244).

In this study though I am not avoiding the method of textual analysis, but to get a complete picture, I am interlinking the analysed texts with social, political and historical contexts of the society where films are being made.

Taking all these aspects into consideration, it can be said that, cinema is a *social institution*, because as a cultural form, it exists within the society. It influences the members of the society by representing social, historical, political or cultural elements of the society. R. Odin (Odin, 1983 cited in Casetti, 1997) calls film as a *social device*, as it allows interaction with a sender and a receiver.

Christian Metz (Metz, 1977 cited in Casetti, 1997) recognises the cultural institution as a threefold *machine*: the industrial one, which works toward the output of the product that are as effective as possible; the mental one, which seeks to perpetuate the spectators' capacity to enjoy film; and the one that finds expression in critical, historical, or theoretical arguments, which attempt to valorise each work.

David Bordwell (Bordwell, 1989 cited in Romao, 2001) argues that the creation of film criticism is an institutionalised activity, with its own forms of social networks and regulative practices. If so, institutional analysis is not merely an effective framework in the study of the cinema, but it can also lead to a genuine sociological understanding in the ways we think about films.

As Bengali Muslim identity has social, political and historical aspects, therefore, an institutional analysis is needed to examine the identity in cinema. In short, in an institutional

analysis, it is possible to address and include social and historical aspects of Bengali Muslim identity in the study of independent cinema.

## **2.4 Film Narratology**

The term *narratology* introduced by Russian formalist Tzvetan Todorov for literature analysis, in recent years, has become the formal name for narrative analysis (Stam et al, 1992). In cinema, narration can be said as a discursive activity that represent or recount the events or situations of the story.

Ranging from formalists to structuralists and post-structuralists, several scholars have worked on narrative theory or narratology. But Gerard Genette's (Genette, 1980) book *Narrative Discourse* is invaluable in narrative theory because it fills the need for a systematic theory of narrative. Every reader of Genette will find that he becomes a more acute and perceptive analyst of fiction than before (Culler, 1980: 7). For the textual analysis of cinema, according to Robert Stam et al (Stam et al, 1992), Gerard Genette's 'narrative discourse' has allowed film theory to describe the various narrative agents and levels in film in a precise manner. Film scholars like David Bordwell (Bordwell, 1995), Murray Smith (Smith, 2005), Seymour Chatman (Chatman, 2005) and Edward Branigan (Branigan, 1992) have endorsed and referred to the subscription of Genette in the discussion of film narratology.

David Bordwell (Bordwell, 1985) has mentioned three approaches of narratology. First and foremost he says, we can treat narrative as a *representation*, considering the story's world, its portrayal of some reality, or its broader meanings. Secondly, we can treat narrative as a *structure*, a particular way of combining parts to make a whole. Thirdly, we can study narrative as a *process*, the activity of selecting, arranging, and rendering story material in order to achieve specific time-bound effects on a perceiver. Bordwell mentions, these three approaches have been addressed by different scholars individually at times crisscrossed. The